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When I Wore a Younger Man's Clothes

The Nostalgia Topic in the Music of Billy Joel

Kendall Waters

Abstract

My father and I often listened to Billy Joel together as I grew up, and I eventually formed nostalgic connections to Joel's music. While music is well known as a conductor of nostalgia, this paper explores the idea that the nostalgia I feel while listening to specific songs in Joel's catalog is not simply a result of the indexical connections I have built with these tracks. Rather, it is a result of a "nostalgia topic" in Joel's work. This paper compares the soundtrack and select works from Joel's catalog to reveal that there is no one gesture, melody, or harmonic progression that Joel relies on to create these connections. Instead, Joel amasses a collection of differing musical elements from his nostalgic soundtrack that he then places into the care of the piano. I therefore argue that Joel's use of the piano evokes the nostalgia topic in his work.

In my world, singer, pianist, and songwriter Billy Joel is a legend. I grew up listening to him with my dad, and we have even argued about which of Joel's songs we should use for the father-daughter dance at my wedding. I often feel nostalgic when listening to Joel, partly because I associate him with my dad; I notice commonalities in the specific Billy Joel songs that make me feel the most nostalgic. These include "Piano Man" from the 1973 album of the same name, "Miami 2017" from the 1976 album *Turnstiles*, "The Stranger" from the 1977 album of the same name, "Goodnight Saigon" from the 1982 album *The Nylon Curtain*, and "Leningrad" from the 1989 album *Storm Front*. I propose that the nostalgia I feel while listening to these works is not simply a result of the indexical connections I have built with these tracks, but that it is also the result of a "nostalgia topic" in Joel's work. I connect the music of Joel with the music of those he cites as musical influences, and I conclude that Joel evokes nostalgia in his music through subtle musical gestures that suggest melodies and progressions similar to those of artists with whom he, and possibly his audience, have built nostalgic connections. In many cases, Joel reveals these gestures through his piano music, suggesting that the use of the piano itself evokes the nostalgia topic in his work.

The Semiotics of Nostalgia

Though my discussion concerns music, my meaning of the term "nostalgia topic" is answered by definitions that are most at home in the study of semiotics. Semiotics, or the study of signs, can be concisely described as the study of anything representing something other than itself. In semiotic terms, topics are symbols, or anything that represents an object by convention.¹ They are additionally a subset of gestures, defined as any intentional movement or action meant to convey information, whether understood by an observer or not.²

Specifically, topics appear when several gestures work together to convey a given meaning that is conventionally understood by an observer.³ Popular examples of topics within musical works include the military topic, which is evoked through the occurrence of a march or fanfare section within a piece of music that is not identified as a march or fanfare, and the pastoral topic, which is evoked through the concurrent gestures of a narrow melody, a slow pace, and a drone, or a single pitch that is constant throughout the musical work.⁴ Therefore, by

using the term "nostalgia topic," I refer to various musical gestures that conventionally represent nostalgia.

I notice commonalities in the specific Billy Joel songs that make me feel the most nostalgic.

Nostalgia itself is a fluid term, and different scholars provide different explanations of what nostalgic experiences entail. Sociologist Janelle Wilson contends that nostalgia involves the intense change in emotional state that results from a nostalgist's choice of what to remember and how.⁵ Anthropologist Marc Augé claims there are two different kinds of nostalgia: a longing for the past as remembered and a longing for what could have been, as produced by the nostalgist's imagination.⁶ These two assertions require active participation from a nostalgist. Philosopher Scott Alexander Howard provides a counterargument implying a nostalgic experience could occur without so much participation; he writes that nostalgia is the spontaneous recovery of a remote event, usually triggered by a sensory cue and accompanied by a strong sense of joy.⁷

Given these differing understandings of nostalgia, we must use a loose definition of the term. Our working definition paraphrases Howard: whether they are actively sought after or passively experienced, "episodes of nostalgia are memory representations of an unrecoverable past, seen, at least in the moment, as meriting desire."⁸ Another facet of nostalgia is that it can be collective or private, meaning it can pertain to a group or to the individual.⁹ An example of a private nostalgic reminder could be a beloved parent's home-cooked specialty, while a collective nostalgic reminder might be a popular line dance song such as Rednex's "Cotton Eye Joe" or Village People's hit "Y.M.C.A." Though many of the musical gestures examined in this paper can be classified as private reminders for Joel, they are discussed with the purpose of finding out how their appearance in his music turns them into collective reminders for his listeners. In other words, this discussion focuses on Joel's personal nostalgic feelings, how he invokes them in his music, and how these invocations become a larger representation of nostalgia for Joel's listeners.

1 Jonathan Gibson and John Peterson, "Semiotics" (lecture, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, January 16, 2020).

2 Jonathan Gibson and John Peterson, "Gestures" (lecture, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, January 30, 2020).

3 John Peterson, "Topoi 001," James Madison University, April 8, 2020, video of lecture, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApZDO_xp5E4&feature=youtu.be.

4 John Peterson, "Topoi 002," James Madison University, April 7, 2020, video of lecture, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1Q2iWbxA8M&feature=youtu.be>.

5 Janelle L. Wilson, "Remember When...": A Consideration of the Concept of Nostalgia," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 56, no. 3 (1999): 299, www.jstor.org/stable/42705763.

6 Marc Augé, "Nostalgia," in *Everyone Dies Young: Time Without Age*, trans. Jody Gladling (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 75-76, doi:10.7312/auge17588.12.

7 Scott Alexander Howard, "Nostalgia," *Analysis* 72, no. 4 (2012): 644, www.jstor.org/stable/23359115.

8 Howard, "Nostalgia," 647.

9 Wilson, "Remember When": A Consideration of the Concept of Nostalgia, 300.

Joel's Private Nostalgia

The question of how the nostalgia topic comes across in Joel's work can be answered by exploring the psychological relationship between music and nostalgia. First, the degree to which a song is important in a person's life can have an impact on the level of nostalgia experienced by the listener when hearing the song. Barrett et al., researchers who have studied the intersections between music and psychology, find that higher levels of nostalgia are experienced when songs are "autobiographically salient" to a listener.¹⁰ "Autobiographically salient" music refers to music that is important in someone's life: for example, the song that was playing when a romantically involved couple shared their first kiss may be autobiographically salient to both partners.

Two of the five case studies in this discussion feature lyrics that are highly autobiographical for Joel. "Piano Man" was written about the regulars at a piano bar at which Joel worked after the release of his first album.¹¹ "Leningrad" was written about a Russian man who met and later befriended Joel and his daughter during the Cold War.¹² Two of the remaining three cases, while not strictly autobiographical, still contain autobiographical elements, and Joel uses the non-autobiographical elements in these cases to create a character for himself, like an actor portraying a character in TV or film. "Goodnight Saigon" was written for friends of Joel's who had served in Vietnam; they reportedly "[told him] what to write."¹³ Despite the fact that Joel himself did not serve, the experiences related in the song were still passed on from men who had, and the text carries that autobiographical weight. Finally, his song "Miami 2017" was intended as a science fiction song written from the point of view of Joel as a grandfather living in Miami, telling his grandkids about "when New York went down the tubes."¹⁴ Though not strictly autobiographical, the song still carries autobiographical weight. At the time of its composition, New York was in a severe financial bind,¹⁵ and the song was an "apocalyptic vision" of what would happen should the city default.¹⁶ In Joel's case, au-

tobiographical details affect the text as well as the music; it makes sense that the nostalgia that comes with telling a personal anecdote influences the mood of the music.

Second, nostalgic connections to music tend to be made in the adolescent years. Journalist Katherine Gillespie used an analysis of Spotify listening data to investigate at which age people tend to solidify their favorite songs; most women make these connections during the age range of 11-14, and most men make these connections during the age range of 13-16.¹⁷ Joel was born in 1949, so he would have been solidifying his nostalgic musical connections from about 1962 to 1966, give or take a year or two. In this way, the psychology behind nostalgic connections made to music provides some of the tools needed to figure out how the nostalgia topic reveals itself in Joel's work.

Joel's musical taste spans an interesting mix of artists from different genres.

The other tools required to define the nostalgia topic in Joel's music are provided by Joel himself, who has spoken extensively on his many musical influences. As his music is an eclectic blend of styles and genres, it is not surprising that Joel's musical taste spans an interesting mix of artists from different genres. For example, Joel cites the jazz pianist Dave Brubeck and the soul artist Otis Redding as influences.¹⁸ Both men were pioneers in their respective genres. Brubeck's unique use of strange time signatures and polytonality, or the simultaneous use of two or more tonal centers in a given work of music, proved appealing to the general public. And his 1959 record, *Time Out*, became the first jazz record to become a certified gold record.¹⁹ Redding's music not only influenced musicians such as Aretha Franklin and Marvin Gaye, who would go on to shape the soul genre, but also quietly encouraged revolution in the era of the civil rights movement; Redding's 1966 "Try a Little Tenderness" joined a host of covers by black musicians "announcing the sound of soul while symbolically reversing the process by which white artists had appropriated and profited on black musical innovation."²⁰ Arguably, one of the biggest influences on Joel's music is the Beatles, who Joel admired as a young man and continues to cite as an

¹⁰ Frederick S. Barrett et al., "Music-Evoked Nostalgia: Affect, Memory, and Personality," *Emotion* 10, no. 3 (June 2010): 390-403, doi:10.1037/a0019006.

¹¹ Billy Joel, "Billy Joel Talks About The Album 'Piano Man' - SiriusXM 2016," produced by SiriusXM, March 19, 2016, Audio interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9miGlmQ24I&feature=youtu.be>.

¹² Billy Joel, "Billy Joel Talks About The Album 'Storm Front' - SiriusXM 2016," produced by SiriusXM, July 19, 2016, Audio interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anRfYE4yLO8&feature=youtu.be>.

¹³ Billy Joel, "Billy Joel Talks About The Album 'The Nylon Curtain' - SiriusXM 2016," produced by SiriusXM, May 31, 2016, Audio interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oc1EZSFID8g&feature=youtu.be>.

¹⁴ Billy Joel, "Billy Joel Talks About The Album 'Turnstiles' - SiriusXM 2016," produced by SiriusXM, April 11, 2016, Audio interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nlooyzf-HY&feature=youtu.be>.

¹⁵ Billy Joel, "Billy Joel - Q&A: What Was The Inspiration For 'Miami 2017'? (UPenn 2001)," An Evening of Questions & Answers, University of Pennsylvania, November 6, 2001, Q&A video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_tXo9IVLTK.

¹⁶ Joel, "Billy Joel Talks ... 'Turnstiles.'"

¹⁷ Katherine Gillespie, "The Science Behind Music's Nostalgic Power," *Vice*, last modified April 2, 2018, accessed April 4, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/43bxpn/the-science-behind-musics-nostalgic-power.

¹⁸ Billy Joel, "Billy Joel Talks About His Musical Influences - SiriusXM 2016," produced by SiriusXM, March 21, 2016, Audio interview, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrocXvCyFlo&list=PLCcQ_CUdaonuHjrnfsjXFlxExsgLqG9uY&index=3.

¹⁹ Hedrick Smith, "The Music: The Music of the Classic Quartet," *Rediscovering Dave Brubeck with Hedrick Smith*, PBS, accessed March 21, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/brubeck/themusicclassicquartet.html>.

²⁰ Emily Lordi, "Hearing Otis Redding's 'Try a Little Tenderness' as a Song of Resistance," *The Atlantic*, accessed March 21, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/12/otis-reddings-try-a-little-tenderness-as-a-song-of-resistance/547655/>.

influence today.²¹ The fascinating commonality among many of the artists Joel mentions in interviews is that a majority of the tracks and albums discussed were released during the mid to late 1960s. The Beatles' albums *Rubber Soul*, *Revolver*, and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* were released in 1965, 1966, and 1967 respectively. It must be acknowledged that some of the music Joel discusses was first released outside the admittedly narrow time window of 1962-1966. However, because of Joel's in-depth explanations about this music's influence on his work and the meaning it has taken in his life, I feel confident including these works in my discussion as possible sources of nostalgia for Joel.

Our Collective Nostalgia

Analyzing songs created by the artists Joel cites as influences for his nostalgic soundtrack exposes a shared set of musical gestures, progressions, and melodies. These commonalities reveal both the depth of Joel's own nostalgia and the sensory cues that evoke nostalgic desire for his audiences, including my father and me.

Jazz and Dave Brubeck

Joel's calling card, "Piano Man," is heavily influenced by both jazz and classical idioms. "Piano Man" features an opening piano solo full of jazzy harmonies and extensions that morphs into a traditional waltz rhythm while a harmonica joins. The opening solo begins with an ascending arpeggio, or a sequence of separate pitches that form a chord when heard simultaneously. This arpeggio leads into a short descending chromatic scale and ends with more chromatic flourishes in the middle register before turning to the waltz rhythm that grounds the song; when I say chromatic, I mean that pitches in these passages are separated by a half-step, which is the shortest musical distance attainable on a standard keyboard. One key influence on "Piano Man" is Dave Brubeck and his 1959 album titled *Time Out*. Brubeck and *Time Out* are the main jazz influences that come up in interviews with Joel, and the second track of Brubeck's album, "Strange Meadow Lark," features elements that are very similar to elements in "Piano Man."²² Like "Piano Man," "Strange Meadow Lark" features an opening piano solo that in turn opens with two main gestures: an upwards glissando in the high register of the keyboard and a downwards quasi sequence that leads into a short melodic interlude in the middle register.

Of course, there are some notable differences between these two songs; unlike the solo in "Piano Man," the main

gestures do not make up the entire "Strange Meadow Lark" solo, which is a two-minute affair. Instead, the two gestures are interspersed with other colorful melodic gestures, and the solo forms an arch in which these gestures act as the ends of the arch. The "Piano Man" solo, on the other hand, is very condensed, lasting about eight seconds, and the end of the solo does not bring any opening material back from the beginning. Despite these differences, both piano solos are built on a very small number of motivic ideas with the similar contour of a quick upwards gesture, a slow return downwards, and closing material in the middle register. It is these core similarities, as well as Joel's public acknowledgment of Brubeck's influence on him and his music, that connect "Piano Man" and "Strange Meadow Lark."

Soul, R&B, and Otis Redding

The opening and closing piano solos of "The Stranger" also imply the jazz genre with their improvisatory style and the accompaniment of brushes on drums. However, it is not just Brubeck's influence that separates Joel's music from that of other rock musicians; Otis Redding's influence appears as well. Specifically, Joel discusses "Try a Little Tenderness," a track Redding first recorded in 1966. While Joel's discussion of this song focuses more on Redding's vocal techniques than on instrumental elements, the opening and closing piano solos of "The Stranger" gesture at "Try a Little Tenderness."²³ Both solos in "The Stranger" consist of sustained piano chords in the lower register and a decorated piano melody in the higher register, and the slight push and pull of the tempo as well as the sprinkling of ornamentation suggests improvisation. "Try a Little Tenderness" does not feature a piano solo at all, but the piano does fade in and out as Redding sings. The similarities between the piano solos in "The Stranger" and the piano part in "Try a Little Tenderness" do not lie in the contour of the melody or similar gestures, but instead in the harmonic progression and the playing style.

The opening and closing piano solos of "The Stranger" also imply the jazz genre with their improvisatory style and the accompaniment of brushes on drums.

In Spotify's recording of "Try a Little Tenderness," 0:20 marks the beginning of a quiet piano progression that sounds very much like the one in the solos in "The Stranger"; 0:44 marks the end of the progression, and another iteration of the progression appears from 0:50 to 1:20. Heard within this time frame are the push and pull of the tempo and a melody that is not quite in time, suggesting an improvisatory style much like the style in "The Strang-

²¹ Billy Joel, "Billy Joel Talks About The Beatles Group & it's Band Members - SiriusXM 2016," produced by SiriusXM, May 16, 2016, audio interview, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTgNo5GhK4s&list=PLCcq_CUdaonuHjrnfsjXFlxExsgLq-G9uY&index=4.

²² Joel, "Billy Joel Talks ... Influences."

²³ Joel, "Billy Joel Talks ... Influences."

er.” Another feature common to both tracks is a striking half cadence; a half cadence is a certain harmonic configuration that marks the end of a musical idea but strongly implies continuation of the musical work. In “Try a Little Tenderness,” a half cadence in A minor divides the verse at 0:26 and 1:03. In Spotify’s recording of “The Stranger,” a half cadence in the home key of E minor ends the first phrase in the opening piano solo at 0:22. It is apparent that while there is a contrast in the similarities between the music of Joel and Brubeck, they are no less important. The similar harmonic progression, improvisatory piano performance style, and stunning half cadence truly link “The Stranger” and “Try a Little Tenderness.”

Rock and Roll and the Beatles

Like many rock musicians, Joel was heavily influenced by the Beatles.²⁴ Their influence is revealed in Joel’s musical decisions, especially in his most nostalgic songs, including “Miami 2017,” “Goodnight Saigon,” and “Leningrad.” Some of this influence comes out consistently in Joel’s music. For example, amongst other Joel works, “Miami 2017” and “Leningrad” feature a steady pulse provided by piano chords. In both works, the pulse functions as a transition from the piano introduction to the first verse and continues to provide background for Joel’s vocals. This piano pulse is reminiscent of various Beatles’ tracks, including the string pulse in “Eleanor Rigby” and the guitar pulse heard throughout “With A Little Help From My Friends.”

Joel references other, more specific musical elements from the Beatles in his music, including harmonic colors, textural treatments, and singing instrumental lines. An example of the Beatles’ coloristic influence appears in “Miami 2017” within the first, third, fifth, and final verses. Most popular music structures are built on a chord progression, or sequence, of I, IV, V, and vi, or some variation of the pattern.²⁵ These chords are common because chord progressions establish the home key of a musical work, and these chords most strongly lead the listener back to the home key. Joel begins the second half of these particular verses with a striking iii chord. Instead of leading back to the home key, the chord shifts the listener’s focus away from the home key, adding a distinctive, unexpected color to the song; a piano solo gets the chord at 0:54-57 and 3:54-57 in Spotify’s recording. In the Beatles’ album *Revolver*, “Got to Get You Into My Life” also employs the iii chord to separate the second half of the verse from the first. The chord can be heard at 0:21-27, 0:48-55, and 1:28-34 in Spotify’s re-

cording. Though the piano solo that opens “Miami 2017” does not include any direct influences from the Beatles, Joel may have gotten the idea for the interesting harmonic color in various verses from the group.

Joel references other, more specific musical elements from the Beatles in his music, including harmonic colors, textural treatments, and singing instrumental lines.

“Goodnight Saigon” is also influenced heavily by the music of the Beatles. In interviews, Joel explains how the textural treatment of the Beatles’ “A Day In The Life” impacted the song.²⁶ He describes the opening of “A Day In The Life” as soft and plaintive, later heading into a big middle section, and he remembers desiring to give the same treatment to “Goodnight Saigon” during the writing process.²⁷ The two songs do in fact have a very similar form, opening with a slower, smaller section that builds to a grander, more symphonic section, repeating the pattern once more before fading out. “Goodnight Saigon” switches its inspiration’s components around a little bit; Joel opens the song with a calm piano solo that eventually gives way to soft guitar. In contrast, “A Day In The Life” opens with guitar, allows the piano a small taste of the spotlight from 0:06-12 on Spotify’s recording, and reverts back to guitar. When “Goodnight Saigon” first builds to a large section around the time stamp 3:21 in Spotify’s recording, the piano can be heard in interplay with the other instruments during this section and continues similarly after the big section returns to the smaller section. Likewise, piano can be heard in interplay with the other instruments in “A Day In The Life” starting at the first instrumental buildup; this is found at 1:36 in Spotify’s recording. “Goodnight Saigon” is the case study in this discussion that is most explicitly influenced by a particular song.

The final case study, “Leningrad,” may have been influenced by “She’s Leaving Home,” another track off the Beatles’ album, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. “Leningrad” opens with yet another piano solo, this one featuring long phrase lengths and a melodic singing line, before transitioning to piano chords, which are heard throughout the track. Joel’s piano bass line is also quite heavy, a quality heard best from 0:21-48 on the Spotify recording. Like “Leningrad,” “She’s Leaving Home” features long melodic lines, in the strings rather than the piano. It is also another Beatles song that features a constant instrumental pulse; a harp provides

²⁴ Joel, “Billy Joel Talks ... The Beatles.”

²⁵ Victoria Longdon, “These four chords are at the heart of every pop song,” *Classic FM*, last modified February 28, 2019, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/music-theory/four-chords-every-pop-song/>. In a pop song written in C major, the chord symbols of the given Roman numeral progression would be C major, F major, G major, and A minor.

²⁶ Joel, “Billy Joel Talks ... ‘The Nylon Curtain.’”

²⁷ Joel, “Billy Joel Talks ... ‘The Nylon Curtain.’”

the pulse from the opening at 0:50 in the Spotify recording before relinquishing the pulse to the strings for the remainder of the song. Lastly, an equivalent to Joel's heavy bass line near the beginning of "Leningrad" can be found in "She's Leaving Home." The heavy use of the cello in "She's Leaving Home" can be heard especially well at 0:12-26, 0:34-40, 1:06-14, 1:24-32, 1:48-52, and 2:20-28 in Spotify's recording. The cello line throughout the track is not quite as low as the piano bass line in "Leningrad," but the prominence of the melodic lower voice is a striking contrast to the higher string hits, much as the heavy bass line is a striking contrast to the higher chordal hits in "Leningrad."

Conclusion

As described, the musical ideas Joel has gained from the artists who potentially make up his nostalgic soundtrack are numerous. While the connection I've drawn between Joel's music and my dad is deeply personal, the nostalgia that I feel when listening to some of Joel's works occurs even when I'm not listening to a song I specifically remember enjoying with my dad. The semiotic approach that I use and the different gestures I analyze in Joel's music showcase a nostalgia topic, through which Joel's work can be interpreted. The various influential artists that I discussed are all musicians that Joel recalls listening to as an older teen, which is when he would have been making nostalgic connections to music.

The one commonality is that Joel places his components into the care of the piano, or, in the case of textural play, grants the piano a significant role in creating contrast.

Elements acquired from such influences range from similarly contoured melodies and comparable harmonic progressions to constant chordal hits and similar styles of performance. In other words, there are few commonalities among the building blocks Joel has received from other artists. The one commonality is that Joel places his components into the care of the piano, or, in the case of textural play, grants the piano a significant role in creating contrast. This myriad of collected elements gathered from Joel's nostalgic soundtrack is consistently revealed through his use of the piano, and it is that fact that leads me to conclude that it is the use of the piano itself, and no one motive or progression it presents, that truly evokes the nostalgia topic in the music of Billy Joel.



Author's Note

Kendall Waters

Kendall Waters ('21) is a major in Music with a minor in Jazz Studies. She hopes that more interdisciplinary projects like this work are on the horizon as she pursues a PhD in Musicology and a career as a researcher and music history educator at a university, but she is specifically interested in Spanish and Latin American music within both folk and art music traditions.

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